Subsistence-Homestead Towns
Penn-Craft
Fayette County
Pennsylvania

~~and~~

~~Norvelt~~
~~Westmoreland County~~
~~Pennsylvania~~

HABS No. PA-5919

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SUBSISTENCE-HOMESTEAD TOWNS HABS No. PA-5919

Location: Town of Penn-Craft and Town of Norvelt
Fayette County Westmoreland County
Pennsylvania Pennsylvania

Significance: Subsistence-homestead communities were developed as part of a broad reaching effort of the New Deal-era intended to relieve the dire economic rural conditions which existed in the 1930s. The projects were designed to give each family a few acres of land to farm for their own consumption beside their own home. As an experiment in environmental and social reform, the development of subsistence homesteads was meant to improve the standard of living through the design of practical small houses, the implementation of a landscape plan, and the provision of community resources for rural areas.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. **Physical History:**

For information regarding the specific physical histories of the towns of Penn-Craft and Norvelt, see HABS Nos. PA-5920 and PA-5921, respectively.

B. **Historical Context:**

The coal region of Westmoreland and Fayette counties in western Pennsylvania is located on the hilly terrain of the western slope of the Allegheny Mountains. The coal bed underneath the surface is complemented by a topsoil rich in lime and suitable for farming. Superceding an agricultural tradition begun in colonial times, the coal-mining industry developed in the late nineteenth century. Americans who had lived in Pennsylvania for generations were joined by more recent immigrants from Eastern Europe to extract bituminous coal needed to fuel America's industries. Farmland gave way to coal mines and coke ovens, and towns with regular rows of two-story frame dwellings were constructed by coal companies to house the growing work force.

When the coal industry faltered in the 1920s, western Pennsylvania--particularly Westmoreland and Fayette counties--was hard hit. As broad-reaching relief efforts, the New Deal-era communities of Norvelt and Penn-Craft were planned to provide a new way of life. Built as subsistence homesteads, the communities were designed to give each family a few acres of land to farm for their own consumption. Cooperative farms and industries were developed to provide employment. Physically, the new towns stood in stark contrast to the company towns. Using curvilinear streets, multiple house plans, and historic building traditions, Norvelt and Penn-Craft are conspicuous in the landscape as carefully planned communities.

Although built by very different organizations, the connections between the two towns are numerous. Norvelt, originally named Westmoreland Homesteads, was located in Westmoreland County just eight miles southeast of the county seat of Greensburg, and was built by the U.S. Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1934-37. Just as Norvelt was nearing completion, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) began construction of Penn-Craft, eleven miles northwest of Uniontown, the seat of Fayette County. Clarence Pickett guided both endeavors, serving as an administrator of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads for about a year, and as secretary of the AFSC for thirty. David Day, on-site project manager for Norvelt until 1936, was then the project manager of Penn-Craft. The architect of Penn-Craft, William Macy Stanton, had worked for the government on another subsistence community, Cumberland Homesteads, in

Tennessee. With such important personnel a part of both projects, the ideas and intentions were understandably similar.

Planning historian Marc Weiss has identified several aspects of new communities that were important to planners in the 1920s and '30s. Two issues key to the subsistence-homestead communities were environmental reform (improving physical living conditions) and social reform (promoting greater economic quality and community empowerment).[1] Although the social-reform aspect of the subsistence-homestead communities received the most attention--especially from a hostile Congress--the environmental aspect was equally important. The development of a practical small house for rural communities and the implementation of a landscape plan that featured curvilinear streets and planned open space advanced contemporary planning thought. In their setting and architecture, Norvelt and Penn-Craft reflected the social ideals of the program: a new way of life, where homeownership was the norm and families could live off the land in times of economic distress.

Living conditions in coal-mining towns declined as the coal industry suffered. Completely dependent upon bituminous-coal production for their economic livelihood, miners were unprepared for the sudden decrease in demand accompanying the end of World War I and the depression of 1921-22. In an effort to maintain profits, coal companies began slashing wages. At the same time, advances in mining technology prompted the replacement of many miners with sophisticated coal-cutting and loading machines. Layoffs, mine closings, and strikes were widespread.

The depression was especially severe in southwestern Pennsylvania's Connellsville coke region, named for a bed of high-quality coal that extended beneath Fayette and Westmoreland counties. Beginning in the 1880s, high-quality coal was mined and burned here to produce coke, a refined fuel for which the iron and steel industry had great demand. By the 1920s, however, beehive coke ovens were being replaced with by-product ovens, and coal processing shifted away from the mine site to the steel mills, largely in urban areas. In the 1920s, about one-third of all of Connellsville's coke plants closed, and the trend continued over the next decade. By 1932, only ten coke plants were operating in the Connellsville region, compared to a high of 118 in 1910.[2]

Plant closings meant unemployment; nationwide, by 1931, about 200,000 miners were out of work, with an additional 300,000 employed irregularly.[3] Living, for the most part, in company-owned houses, several thousand miners and their families were evicted in 1922 alone, following the nationwide coal strike that year. Those not evicted ran up considerable debts for food and rent despite access to federal relief funds. Coal companies, unable to meet their

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[1]Marc A. Weiss, "Developing and Financing the 'Garden Metropolis': Urban Planning and Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America," Planning Perspectives 5 (1990): 308.

[2]John Aubrey Enman, "The Relationship of Coal Mining and Coke Making to the Distribution of Population Agglomerations in the Connellsville (Pennsylvania) Beehive Coke Region" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1962), 327, 351.

[3]Clarence E. Pickett, For More Than Bread (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1953), 20.

financial obligations, let maintenance of their properties slide so that many miners' houses fell into disrepair. Stories began to circulate about mining families eking out a minimal existence as they strove to survive the effects of a collapsing industry.

The ideological impetus for the development of subsistence homesteads was the back-to-the-land movement. Founded in Jeffersonian agrarianism, and in many ways a recurring theme of American culture, back-to-the-land sentiment resurfaced in the 1920s, just after the 1920 census recorded, for the first time, that the majority of the population was urban or suburban.[4] A disparate assortment of political groups found common ground with this movement: church groups, southern agrarians, capitalist decentralists (advocating the decentralization of industry), distributist decentralists (who believed that distribution costs engendered by mass production outweighed its savings), supporters of a purely cooperative economy, disciples of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henry David Thoreau, and city planners and housing experts.[5] With millions of persons thrown out of work and urban dwellers unable to provide basic foodstuffs for themselves, the ideal of the self-sufficient farmer reasserted itself. Unemployed urban dwellers moved back to the family farm, where at least they had a house and a means of feeding themselves.[6] Although rural dwellers were as likely as urbanites, if not more so, to be poor, the perception was that unemployment was an urban problem. The corollary was that rural life was the solution, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt shared this belief. As Rexford Tugwell, a member of Roosevelt's "brain trust," described it:

> To argue in such a situation for a return to the land made no sense; it would not make much more sense in the depression years to argue that the unemployed could be cared for in this way. But to Franklin it seemed axiomatic that in the country they would have shelter at least, and if they would work, something to eat. It was not that simple, as he was to learn at some cost. But he resisted the lesson for a long time.[7]

The contradiction inherent in sending more people to farm in a time of surplus agricultural produce was not lost on Milburn L. Wilson, who headed the government's subsistence homestead program. Instead, Wilson advocated a program of "part-time" or subsistence farming--

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[4]Gwendolyn Wright, Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 195.

[5]Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1942), 14.

[6]M. L. Wilson, "The Place of Subsistence Homesteads in our National Economy," Journal of Farm Economics 16 (January 1934): 74; U.S. Congress, Senate, Resettlement Administration Program: Letter from the Administrator of the Resettlement Administration (Sen. Doc. 213, 74th Cong., 2d sess., 12 May 1936), 1; U.S. Department of the Interior, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, "General Information Concerning the Purposes and Policies of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads," (Circular No. 1, 15 November 1933), 10.

[7]Rexford G. Tugwell, The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 159.

farming for a household's own consumption--linking a long tradition of "part-time" farming to the popularity of garden cities. Unlike the garden cities envisioned by Ebenezer Howard, the influential British urban reformer, which were planned with large farms, American towns planned along the lines of the garden city did not.[8] Wilson's introduction of part-time farming into a planned community was an interesting twist. Like the planners of garden cities, however, Wilson counted on industry to provide employment, as well.

Decentralizing industry was thus an important aspect of putting industrial workers back on the land. Recent innovations--including the automobile, paved roads, cheap electricity, and rapid communications--permitted industry to go where the people were. Wilson envisioned "a new type of community in which the industries can be in the center, and the families, instead of living on town lots, can live on blocks of land in subsistence homesteads for ten or fifteen miles in every direction."[9] The decentralization of industry was more of a hope than a current trend, however. The coke industry in Pennsylvania's Westmoreland and Fayette counties, for example, suffered when the steel-mill owners moved coking to the mill sites in Pittsburgh, rather than remaining at the mine sites in the counties.

The subsistence-homestead movement was also fed by adjustments made because of the Depression. With the desire to spread wage-labor around, shorter working hours were instituted--thus freeing workers for part-time farming. The dislocations of the Depression also led to a new appreciation of community and home life--perhaps a nostalgic view of pre-industrial America. Wilson pointed to a "revolt against the crass materialism and shallowness of the jazz age" in favor of wholesome community living.[10] Homeownership allowed these family values to flourish, cultivating feelings of security and pride. Increased homeownership, both a goal and a guarantee of the American way of life, had not been well served by the modern industrial system. As envisioned, the subsistence-homestead program would provide not only suburban-type houses, owned by their occupants, but also a community of like-minded families.

PRIVATE RELIEF EFFORTS

The extreme poverty in the coal regions of the Allegheny Mountains inspired a number of private relief efforts throughout the region. In the coalfields of West Virginia, the Council of Social Agencies coordinated the activities of the American Legion, Salvation Army, and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The latter group had been founded in Philadelphia in 1917 to provide alternative service for Friends who were conscientious objectors to military service. During World War I, its members drove ambulances and worked on relief efforts in Europe, and after the war, aided in the rehabilitation of war-torn countries. In 1931 President Herbert Hoover asked the U.S. Children's Bureau to study the children of unemployed coal miners. Finding serious shortages of food and clothing, dilapidated housing, and rampant illness, the Children's

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[8]M. L. Wilson, "Rural Urban Life and the New Deal" (typescript, 1933), 2; Wilson, "The Place of Subsistence Homesteads," 75; Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of To-Morrow (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 60-61.

[9]Wilson, 80.

[10]Wilson, 79, 81; Circular No. 1, 3.

Bureau approached the AFSC for assistance. Hoover offered $225,000, which the AFSC more than matched.[11] In the winter of 1931-32, the AFSC fed 40,000 children a day in thirty-eight coalfield counties.[12] Communities in West Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, Illinois and Pennsylvania were all beneficiaries of this effort.

The next winter, the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation offered relief funds, but several counties asked the AFSC to administer them. Beyond immediate relief, the AFSC undertook rehabilitation programs, which included the Mountaineer Craftsmen's Cooperative Association, formed to produce hand-crafted furniture, in West Virginia. The AFSC also experimented with subsistence gardens and started a farm-colony project in West Virginia. Health programs, stressing sanitary improvement, and emergency medical aid were also provided by the AFSC.[13]

By 1934, the AFSC devoted much of its energies toward assisting the government's subsistence-homestead program. For example, fifty-five volunteers participated in a summer work camp, constructing a water line and providing social work at Westmoreland Homesteads. The AFSC also established cooperative shops at several subsistence homesteads.[14] Fully supportive of the government's program, the AFSC was reluctant to undertake the large-scale development of subsistence homesteads itself.

GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

The administration of the subsistence-homestead program--the only New Deal program devoted exlcusively to community building--was the responsibility of several New Deal agencies.[15] Beginning as the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, an agency of the Department of Interior, the program moved to the Resettlement Administration when it was formed as an independent agency in 1935. Two years later, the homestead program moved to the Department of Agriculture and became part of the Farm Security Administration. With each move, subsistence homesteads received less support, reflecting shifting sentiment of Congress and the public.

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[11]Stephen Edward Haid, "Arthurdale: An Experiment in Community Planning, 1933-1947" (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 1975), 6; Pickett, 21. Hoover himself was a Quaker. The relief efforts of the AFSC were compatible with his philosophy of volunteerism and self-help, not direct government programs.

[12]AFSC, Annual Report 1931-32: 15.

[13]AFSC, Annual Report 1931-32: 15, 17; 1933: 16-17; 1934-35: 14.

[14]AFSC, Annual Report 1934-35: 15, 17.

[15]Paul K. Conkin, Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 7.

The precedent for federal development of communities had been established during World War I by the U.S. Shipping Board,[16] which had developed fifty-three shipyard-workers' communities. As the government's involvement in the shipyard-workers' communities was intended to be temporary, it sold off the houses soon after the war. In this housing venture, the government struggled to provide low-cost yet attractive housing and to be a model for private-industry efforts--issues that would reappear in the New Deal program.

The National Industrial Recovery Act, passed in May 1933, authorized $25 million to be spent on subsistence homesteads. Section 208 of the public works program (Title II) was not specific:

> To provide for aiding in the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers $25,000,000 is hereby made available . . . for making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads.[17]

Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of Interior, appointed Milburn L. Wilson to the post of director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. Wilson hired Clarence E. Pickett, executive secretary of the AFSC, as his assistant, with special responsibility for homesteads in mining communities. Wilson identified three major categories of communities to be created by the subsistence homestead program:

> (1) Workers' garden homesteads near small industrial centers in which small industries are located and to which further decentralization is likely to take place; (2) Workers' garden homesteads near large industrial centers, usually of heavy industries not likely to decentralize; (3) Projects for rehabilitation of "stranded" industrial population groups, particularly bituminous coal miners.[18]

These three categories were realized in about 100 subsistence homesteads developed by the government. Of these, only four were built to house "stranded" miners. The "stranded" bituminous coal miners were estimated to number at least 200,000 persons, who, the government claimed, "have little or no prospect of future employment." In some cases this was due to

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[16]Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, A History of Urban America, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 269.

[17]Circular No. 1, 1.

[18]Circular No. 1, 7-8. In the circular, he identified two additional groups: "(4) Projects for reorganization of disorganized rural communities, and for elimination of rural slums on lands submarginal for agriculture; (5) Movement of population, largely farm families, from submarginal dry-farming lands in the West, to unoccupied farms on existing Federal reclamation projects, to be done in cooperation with the Bureau of Reclamation." These two categories were soon shifted to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and did not form part of the subsistence homesteads program. "Subsistence Homesteads for Industrial and Rural Workers at the End of 1934," Monthly Labor Review 40 (January 1935): 21.

changing technology, but unemployment also resulted from the exhaustion of the resource.[19] The mines closed, and were not expected to reopen.

As envisioned in the Division of Subsistence Homesteads' Circular No. 1, the communities would have between twenty-five and 100 homesteads, each with one to five acres for subsistence farming "for the household use of the family and not for sale in the market." Home and small industries were encouraged to provide clothing and cash incomes, and the homesteaders would acquire their plots on long-term purchase contracts.[20]

Initially the government intended that the homesteads be constructed by the homesteaders themselves. Circular No. 1 outlined the features of this "self-help" program:

> Prospective homesteaders will insofar as possible perform, under competent supervision, the various constructional and other activities connected with preparing and improving their homesteads for occupancy and operation. It is the policy of the Division to encourage the fullest possible use of the homesteader's labor on his own homestead. His otherwise unemployed labor will thus be advantageously utilized to establish a substantial equity in his home and to reduce materially the financial burden upon his limited resources.[21]

The division's Bulletin No. 1, issued a year later, however, contained no mention of "self-help" construction, indicating a change in policy. Only four homestead communities, including Norvelt, used homesteaders' labor, paying for it partly in cash and partly with credits toward the purchase price.[22] More often, the homesteaders were hired as Public Works Administration relief labor. Federal wage-rate and working-hour provisions, as well as hiring restrictions, prevailed, causing construction costs to rise by one-third, according to one estimate.[23]

The first homestead for stranded coal miners was Arthurdale, West Virginia, constructed near Reedsville, in the same region where the AFSC had been so active. Often cited as a model, and receiving Eleanor Roosevelt's personal attention, the 165 units at Arthurdale were also the most expensive of the entire program, averaging more than $16,000 per unit. In December 1933, the division announced construction of a second West Virginia project, Tygart Valley, near Elkins, for which 270 units were planned (195 were built). In January 1934, the last two stranded-miners' communities were announced. Cumberland Homesteads, near Crossville, Tennessee, was the

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[19]Circular No. 1, 2.

[20]Circular No. 1, 8.

[21]Circular No. 1, 11.

[22]Three were stranded-miners' communities: Cumberland Homesteads, TN; Tygart Valley, WV; and Norvelt. Memorandum, Comptroller-General to Administrator, Resettlement Administration, 8 November 1935, Box 29, Record Group 207, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. The fourth was a project in Dayton, Ohio. Conkin, 114.

[23]Lord and Johnstone, 51.

largest, with plans for 350 units (262 were built). Westmoreland Homesteads--later named Norvelt--near Greensburg, Pennsylvania, would have 250 units. Ultimately 254 were built here, at a unit cost of almost $10,000.[24]

The average unit cost in the ninety-nine subsistence homesteads, as at Norvelt, was just under $10,000[25]--hardly an attractive price to those who might want to imitate the program. These costs included community land and buildings, administrative overhead, and industrial seed money, however; construction of each house was closer to $2,000. The role of the homesteads as a demonstration program increased the cost, with building methods and materials not necessarily the cheapest. At the same time, the high cost of the program galvanized the critics and reduced the likelihood of the subsistence homesteads being duplicated.

Attracting industries to these new communities proved to be the greatest difficulty. When the Division of Subsistence Homesteads attempted to establish a new industry at Arthurdale, manufacturing equipment for the post-office department, members of Congress whose districts would be adversely affected protested. Fearing government control of all industry, opponents managed to stop the proposed factory at Arthurdale.[26] The Division of Subsistence Homesteads then tried to lure industry with language such as:

> We want the leaders of industry to establish branch factories near our homesteads projects. Instead of adding a wing to the old plant, let them consider the possibility of establishing a small branch plant where they can draw upon homestead labor, ready and anxious for employment. Let them remember that these homesteaders are picked workers, they they have been carefully selected for character, integrity, and native ability, from among the thousands of persons who have made application.[27]

The effort was only occasionally successful.

In another crucial move, the administration of the subsistence homesteads was left entirely to the federal government. The homesteads were originally administered by the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation in conjunction with subsidiary local corporations, in order to free the program from government red tape and to assure local involvement. Adverse rulings by the Comptroller General, however, severely limited the freedom of these local corporations, and in May 1934 Secretary Ickes abolished them. Wilson, head of the division, believed that the local corporations were a crucial part of the program, providing the grass-roots involvement necessary to make it a success. At the end of June Wilson left the division and returned to the Department

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[24]Conkin, 332; "Subsistence Homesteads, 1934," 22.

[25]Conkin, 337.

[26]Conkin, 117.

[27]"Subsistence Homesteads, 1934," 32.

of Agriculture. Nullification of the local corporations left the homestead communities with little local support.[28]

In May 1935, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads was transferred to the Resettlement Administration, a new agency headed by Rexford G. Tugwell. The division had spent only $7 million of its $25 million allocation, but eighteen communities were well under way. Tugwell believed the idea that industry would decentralize voluntarily was erroneous. The stranded-miners' communities, particularly dependent upon would-be industries, came to be strongly identified with Tugwell, although he said they were established "on a theory in which none of us believed"--that industry would decentralize. Tugwell strongly encouraged the development of cooperative enterprises, for he wanted the homesteaders to develop their own sources of employment. Agricultural produce and processing was one area ripe for cooperatives, although there was a limit to the profitability of the land; thus, the labor force was not infinitely expandable. Community purchasing of machinery and other goods was another area for cooperatives. One community--Jersey Homesteads--had a cooperative garment factory, which Tugwell, noting opposition, said "is considered to be the limit."[29] Soon after, Norvelt also established a cooperative garment factory with a loan from the government. By mid-1935, when Tugwell took over the subsistence-homestead program, the worst of the Depression was over, and the honeymoon period granted experimental programs such as subsistence homesteads had ended. Tugwell's reign was a stormy one, and he resigned from the Resettlement Administration after about eighteen months.

In January 1937, the subsistence homesteads were transferred to the Department of Agriculture, which established the Farm Security Administration, under whose umbrella they fell in September 1937. Having withstood several years of attacks, the program was under increasing pressure to sell off its property. In 1939 Congress cut off funds for the completion of communities. Mobilization for World War II caused some coal mines to re-open, providing employment for homesteaders and other jobless miners. In the Connellsville region, some of the abandoned beehive-oven coking plants re-opened, as the demand for coke soared.[30] At the same time, the homestead program came under increased fire in Congress, where cooperative associations and long leases struck members as antithetical to American ideals of capitalism and home-ownership. In 1946 the Farm Security Administration programs were moved to the Farmers' Home Corporation, which was given eighteen months to liquidate all property. By February 1948, all of the subsistence homestead units--more than 10,000--had been sold to individuals and homestead associations.

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[28]Lord and Johnstone, 45; Conkin, 122.

[29]Resettlement Administration, 5; Rexford G. Tugwell, "Cooperation and Resettlement," Current History 45 (February 1937): 74; Tugwell, 75.

[30]Enman, 332.

RESPONSE OF THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

When M. L. Wilson left the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in 1934, Clarence Pickett returned to the AFSC. He immediately proposed that the Friends sponsor their own subsistence homestead community--Penn-Craft. The one element Pickett cited in his autobiography that would make this new homestead different from those of the government was self-help construction.[31] Unlike in the other stranded-miners' communities, construction labor would be traded among the homesteaders--a more cooperative approach than the credit-for-labor system in the federal communities. In fact, Pickett's oblique comments about "no government restrictions" probably referred to his desire to make this new community far more cooperative than congressional sentiment would permit the government projects. The new town supported a cooperative industry from the beginning, and an active local cooperative association.

Other differences included the size of the project and the role of the private sector. Pickett's first task was to raise $200,000 to finance the project. He met with immediate success, receiving $80,000 from the U.S. Steel Corporation, which owned most of the coal mines and coke plants in Fayette County. To make the project more manageable, the Quaker homestead would be considerably smaller (only fifty families compared to Westmoreland's 254), and the participants carefully screened. In addition, the homesteaders would participate in every aspect of the project, from construction to administration. Penn-Craft was constructed in due course, and was deemed a success by planners and homesteaders alike. By stressing self-help and cooperation, the AFSC succeeded in creating a model community to be replicated elsewhere in the United States and abroad, wherever social and economic relief was needed.

Proud to share its ideas, the Friends established a self-help counseling service in 1944. After the war, industrial workers in Lorain, Ohio, a community center for blacks in Indianapolis, and the AFSC's own slum-clearance project in Philadelphia all learned from the AFSC's experience with Penn-Craft. Today there are an estimated 5,000 self-help housing organizations nationwide.[32] But if the self-help aspect of the project survived, the subsistence farming did not. The subsistence-homestead idea quietly faded, lost in post-war prosperity and increased urbanization.

Today, the social-reform aspect of these New Deal subsistence-homestead communities--the cooperative associations, self-help construction programs, and government and AFSC involvement--are gone. Built as visionary, experimental projects, the communities have outgrown their new-ness and innovation. What distinguishes them today from the coal-patch towns that surround them are the aspects of environmental reform that they embodied. Unlike the regular rows of two-story gable-roofed houses that the coal companies built for their workers, and unlike the occasional nineteenth-century farmhouse with an aggregation of ells and porches, these are small, tidy, free-standing houses, set on ample lots. The design intent of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, shared by the AFSC, is reflected in both the towns that are the subject of this study.

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[31]Pickett, 64.

[32]AFSC, Annual Report 1944: 22; Pickett, 81; Richard J. Margolis, Something to Build On: The Future of Self-Help Housing in the Struggle Against Poverty (International Self-Help Housing Associates and the AFSC, 1967), 21; Wright, 278.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. **General Statement:**

The design of the houses sparked a debate over whether to provide minimal housing, appropriate for a relief program, or model housing, appropriate to a demonstration program. Simplistically, the argument came down to the provision of indoor toilets. One camp, led by President Roosevelt and Secretary Ickes, favored the construction of minimal houses without plumbing or electricity, while another faction, led by Eleanor Roosevelt and M. L. Wilson, supported four- or five-room houses with modern conveniences. Since in 1933 most of rural America still lacked indoor plumbing and electricity, whether to include such amenities in a federal housing project was a potentially explosive issue. Senators such as Harry F. Byrd of Virginia and K. D. McKellar of Tennessee especially condemned the "extravagance" of electricity, refrigerators, and indoor toilets for "simple mountain folk." Indoor facilities were a burdensome amenity to homesteaders who were struggling to purchase the homes they had built, as the modern conveniences increased the cost of the houses. Bruce Melvin, a sociologist with the division, stated his desire "to build houses that provide a better standard of living than that to which the families are accustomed." By his reasoning, if family members were used to sharing a toilet, whether outside or inside, with four or five other families, then providing them with their own toilet, even if outside, was an improvement that they could afford.[33]

Eleanor Roosevelt is usually credited with changing the President's mind on this issue. After her August 1933 visit to coal camps and AFSC relief efforts in West Virginia, she became a vocal advocate of modern conveniences for miners' families. She was aided by Clarence Pickett, who found an acceptable political reason to provide bathrooms--to revive the plumbing-fixtures industry. He was told that "if every family in the United States were to have one bathtub, all the bathtub factories in the United States would have to work eight hours a day for ten years to supply the demand."[34] The provision of indoor toilets was initially the policy of the subsistence-homesteads program, but the bathroom debate continued through the life of the program.

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads' Circular No. I set general policies for the program and issued the following instructions:

> The homestead developments will be laid out and constructed in accordance with approved planning, architectural, and engineering practice. While the structures and other facilities must necessarily be moderate in cost, they will conform to standards of convenience, durability, sanitation, and attractiveness with sufficient variation in design to avoid monotony. Availability of highway or other

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[33]Elizabeth Straw, "National Register of Historic Places: Cumberland Homesteads Historic District," National Park Service, 1988; George S. Wehrwein, "An Appraisal of Resettlement," Journal of Farm Economics 19 (1937): 198; Bruce L. Melvin, "Housing Standards for Subsistence Homes," Architectural Record 77 (January 1935): 9.

[34]Clarence E. Pickett, "The Social Significance of the Subsistence Homestead Movement," Journal of Home Economics 26 (October 1934): 479.

> transportation facilities, and proper facilities for health and sanitation and for electric light and other essential utility services, will be required.[35]

Bulletin No. 1, issued a year later, clarified the situation only slightly:

> Houses vary in size and cost according to the group to be accommodated. In size, the houses range from 3 to 6 rooms. Three-room houses, however, are not constructed if they cannot be expanded with a minimum of alteration. The cost of houses will be from $2,000 to $3,000.[36]

Bruce Melvin, an assistant to M. L. Wilson, expanded on the design issues in an article published in the Architectural Record in January 1935. Melvin noted that the purposes of the subsistence homestead program were threefold: (1) to enable home ownership; (2) to improve the standard of living; and (3) to assist the occupants "to better living." To help achieve the last, he articulated guidelines for the site and the house. Noting that "the making of an harmonious whole . . . is the work of an artist," he advised that the houses should be part of the landscape yet set in harmonious relation to each other and to the community center.[37]

New Deal historian Paul Conkin has identified the development of a functional rural architecture as one of the innovations of the subsistence-homestead program. Wilson had issued a challenge early in 1934:

> There is a need for new types of low cost comfortable and attractive houses which are architecturally beautiful and acceptable and adapted to the subsistence homestead communities. Will it not be possible to work out types of houses which will be cheap but beautiful, durable and convenient, and adapted to mass production and still utilize unskilled labor in their construction?[38]

Based neither on urban homes nor impractical rural designs, the proposed buildings were closest to single-family suburban prototypes. Melvin noted: "they are neither city nor farm homes; they lie midway between the two." His instructions were:

> The architecture, plan, elevation and general appearance should be part of a planned scheme and be based upon the indigenous architecture of the region, unless it is definitely desirable to introduce a completely new plan of construction involving the most modern designs and materials.[39]

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[35]Circular No. 1, 11.

[36]U.S. Department of the Interior, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, "Information Concerning the Purposes and Policies of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads" (Bulletin No. 1, 1934), 5.

[37]Melvin, 9.

[38]Conkin, 172; Wilson, 81.

[39]Melvin, 9.

In Homestead Houses, a collection of thirty-two perspectives and plans, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads carefully noted the geographic location or proposed location of the houses, distinguishing between northern and southern types. The authors apologized for cost-cutting measures, and noted, "they are to be so interpreted as not to discourage local and regional needs and traditions."[40] Regionalism was further addressed in a 1935 article: "In the southern regions the house plans generally follow the local traditions and styles of building, in California and Florida houses of Spanish or Mediterranean type are used, and in the northern sections designs are generally colonial."[41] Local building materials were also used, such as the crab orchard sandstone used on the Cumberland Homesteads in Tennessee, and the adobe used for construction of Phoenix Homesteads in Arizona.

The architectural styles, where apparent, were conservative, with terms such as "Cape Cod" or "New England Colonial" being freely used. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads' architectural adviser was Andrew H. Hepburn, of the Boston architectural firm of Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, noted for the restoration and reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg. Hepburn may have been responsible for the stylistically conservative bent of the subsistence homesteads. The promotion of indigenous styles may have also been an attempt to eliminate any connotations of foreignness from the project. Sensitive to criticisms that the subsistence-homestead projects benefitted non-citizens, the designers may have wished to avoid "foreign" revival styles. In addition, modern architecture was associated with European socialist movements, and the cooperative nature of the program was enough to alarm those opposed to socialism.[42] One homestead project, Jersey Homesteads (now the town of Roosevelt, New Jersey), was built in the modern style; the flat roofs and sharp corners of those houses are a vivid contrast to the more staid architecture employed elsewhere.

But the hallmark of the collection was form, rather than style. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads publication advised:

> The architectural merit of the design depends not upon superficial ornamentation and decoration but upon the proportion of one mass to another, the relation of roof to walls, the placing of doors and window openings, the slope of the roof, etc.[43]

This collection of plans and perspectives shows a number of small, one- or one-and-a-half-story buildings, often in an L-plan, with porches and other variations. Although not large, the houses impart tidy suburban comfort.

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[40]U.S. Department of the Interior, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Homestead Houses (1934), 2. The houses were designed by the Architectural Unit (Brown Rolston, chief) of the Construction Section (J. H. Jenkins, chief) of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, and by private architects associated with the Division. The title page also listed as consultants: Blanche Halbert, House Planning; A. H. Hepburn, Architecture; and John Nolen, Land Planning.

[41]"Subsistence Homesteads, 1934," 24.

[42]Wright, 273.

[43]Homestead Houses, 2.

A good deal of attention was given to the function of the houses, in the vein of Progressive-era architectural reform. Particular to a subsistence homstead, Melvin recommended that the houses be provided with mud rooms, as people will be entering with dirt and mud on their feet. Melvin also encouraged a living room "where the family can associate informally and joyously."[44] The division's publication clarified this by discouraging a parlor "too often reserved for extraordinary functions" in favor of a living room "suitably and abundantly used." Dining rooms were omitted and double-purpose spaces encouraged, as a cost-saving measure.[45]

Circulation was a related concern. By placing the living room centrally, the designers attempted to insure that it would be used, not reserved as a parlor. Likewise, the kitchen should be central. Melvin was particularly concerned for the housewives' happiness:

> It is most important to consider the place and work of the woman in this home, because much of the success of the family in the homestead will depend on the contentment of the wife. Though this is a way of life, it is one that may be exceedingly hard for the wife, part of whose duty will be to oversee the production and preserving of food.[46]

The government also advised that the bedrooms should be arranged so that no one would have to pass through another bedroom to get to the bathroom. In attempting to alleviate the overcrowded conditions of coal-patch housing, "proper bedroom accommodations for both adults and children"--and presumably separate ones--were recommended.[47] A storage room, either as part of the house or detached, should be provided for the fruits and vegetables the subsistence farms would produce.

In 1939, after five years' experience with subsistence homesteads, the government issued another pamphlet on house design, Small Houses. The government's experience with subsistence-homestead communities was apparent; some of the subsistence-homestead houses were used to illustrate the new pamphlet. The plans were compact, convenient, and functional: "every unnecessary gable, beam, and purely decorative feature was eliminated." The quality of the older houses was maintained: "first-grade materials were used throughout, so that maintenance and repair costs would be as low as possible." But the newer publication stressed economy, claiming that its houses could be built for $1,000 to $1,500--half the cost predicted five years before. Precutting, prefabrication, and mass production had proven effective in reducing costs. In addition, the new plans did not insist on bathrooms in every house.[48]

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[44]Melvin, 9.

[45]Homestead Houses, 2.

[46]Melvin, 10.

[47]Homestead Houses, 2.

[48]U. S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, Small Houses (1939), unpaginated. By 1939, the Farm Security Administration administered the subsistence-homestead program.

Although the subsistence homesteads were intended as low-cost housing projects, their experimental and demonstrative aspects caused the costs to rise prohibitively. Architecturally, the demonstration-program aspect was reflected in the attempt to provide indoor bathrooms for all, while the experimental nature is seen in the indigenous styles and materials. Today, several decades later, low-cost housing depends on high volume and leaves no room for indigenous building traditions. In the resulting uniformity across the American landscape, the sensitivity to design and the visionary quality of the subsistence homesteads are sadly lacking.

> It is hoped that our story as told in this book will be an inspiration to all who strive to achieve the American ideal of home ownership and a better environment. With each stone that was quarried, hauled or laid; with each window frame that was made; with all the hosts of other jobs which are a part of the building of homes, we feel that we literally built ourselves into Penn-Craft... What we have done, we feel that any group any where in the country could do if they really want to work together to improve their standard of living.[49]

Norvelt and Penn-Craft, both located in the Connellsville coke region, were visionary responses to dire economic conditions. Norvelt was a government undertaking, begun with all the idealism of the New Deal. Penn-Craft was a private group's response, determined that they could do it better without government red tape. Trading on the government's experience, the American Friends Service Committee kept Penn-Craft small, one-fifth the size of Norvelt; its fifty families were hand-picked and easily governed.

As an experiment in social reform, both Norvelt and Penn-Craft were deemed successful by their backers. Unlike Norvelt, where local corporations were forbidden, Penn-Craft had an active local corporation. Penn-Craft's families were closely observed, whereas the size and diversity of Norvelt's population permitted numerous interest groups to form. The homesteaders embraced community life, much to the surprise of homestead officials who doubted the ability of coal miners to adapt to a cooperative project. As a researcher evaluating Penn-Craft stated:

> Although the residents of mining patches and company coal towns live closely together, they are about as devoid of social and community activities as any group of people can be. Coal miners outside of their union activities have little experience in group community life or in democratic processes of self government. They have not had the kind of experience which enables them to fit easily into a community which is trying to use the democratic process as a means of community education.[50]

While it is true that residents of coal towns were typically denied the right to "democratic processes of self government," miners and their families nevertheless participated in a wide range of activities--some company-sponsored, some not--that fostered a deep-rooted sense of community identity. The development of community awareness was also aided by the miners'

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[49]Penn-Craft Tenth Year Anniversary, 1937-1947 (Penn-Craft, privately printed, 1947).

[50]Frederick L. W. Richardson, Jr., "Community Resettlement in a Depressed Coal Region," Applied Anthropology (October-December 1941): 30.

common experience within the coal-company town system.[51] Although the image of the independent miner prevailed, miners and their families were quite accustomed to helping each other out, whether down in the mine or above ground in the patch. Evidently unaware of the extent to which miners and their families interacted, various sociologists and evaluators were pleased by the relative ease with which the homesteaders adapted to cooperative life.

If imitation is the measure of success for an experimental program, then the subsistence homesteads fell short. Not only was the experiment not repeated, but due to an abrupt change in the economic climate, several aspects of the existing homestead programs were terminated or incompletely developed. When, less than ten years after the homestead program was initiated, America went to war, the depression economy became a boom economy. Coal mines were re-opened, coke plants re-fired, and the region experienced a modest prosperity. In a climate of rising expectations, the tenuous existence that the subsistence homesteads could provide was no longer enough.

The more radical elements of the subsistence homesteads were the first to fade. The industrial and agricultural cooperatives at both Norvelt and Penn-Craft became private enterprises. Part-time farming was replaced by full-time employment. The farming aspect of the subsistence homesteads was also apparently one of the least appealing to the homesteaders; one evaluator noted "friction arising from the attempt to impose a subsistence pattern of living."[52] The subsistence homestead today is rarely that; the generous acreage is only occasionally, and partially, farmed for home consumption. One aspect of the program that was imitated--self-help construction--did not last beyond the construction phase. The AFSC promoted self-help construction more than the government, which decided against using it for the remainder of the subsistence homesteads.

The subsistence homesteads were effective as relief projects, providing short-term assistance to the impoverished, but they failed to elevate the truly destitute from relief-roll reliance. Within a year of the program's founding, the division's annual report noted that "the principal responsibility" was "to assist families who are on an economic level above that of the sheer relief group." In the federal program, the sale price of the houses was set at a level attainable for a homesteader with an $850 annual cash income, but by 1942 one evaluator insisted that purchasers needed an income of $1,200 or more, which put them in the lower middle-income group.[53] Homesteaders with an income of less than that required ongoing subsidy.

Whether these houses were provided at a low cost is a matter of debate. The AFSC claimed that self-help construction enabled the Penn-Craft houses to be built at a low cost,[54]

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[51]See Margaret M. Mulrooney, A Legacy of Coal: The Coal Company Towns of Southwestern Pennsylvania (Washington, D. C.: National Park Service, HABS/HAER Division, 1989).

[52]Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads (Washington: Department of Agriculture, 1942), 181.

[53]Lord and Johnstone, 49, 179.

[54]American Friends Service Committee, "Evaluation of Experiences at Penn-Craft during Three-Year Period 1937-1940," 10.

ignoring the fact that more than one-third of the cost of the houses was subsidized. Two-thirds of the cost of the Norvelt houses was subsidized, however, even though those houses were also built by their future owners. More expensive designs, cash payments for homesteaders' labor, and bureaucratic complications added to their cost.

Environmental reform was one of the more intriguing aspects of the program. Through the 1930s, the government continued to build planned communities, profiting in some cases from its experience with the subsistence-homestead communities. Norris, Tennessee, was one of the more notable, built in 1935-37. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads funded one-third of its $2.1 million cost, while the remainder came from the Tennessee Valley Authority. Norris's houses and roads blended with the topography, there were ample open areas, and the town was surrounded by a greenbelt.[55] Beginning in 1935, the Resettlement Administration constructed three greenbelt towns, hailed as the most significant undertaking of the New Deal, in terms of community building. Viewed as the culmination of the garden-city movement in America, the greenbelt towns were built on the fringes of metropolitan areas as complete communities, with streets, schools, playgrounds, and housing. In their farms, forests, and planned open spaces--much of it contained in a protective "green belt"--the new towns maintained a rural feel. Like the subsistence-homestead communities, these government-built expressions of the garden-city movement were part of a planning continuum that resulted in Federal Housing Administration policies--policies that affected the appearance of the suburban landscape of the 1940s and '50s.[56]

The plan for the subsistence homes incorporated several features that are valued today: a layout that respects the landscape; variation in layout and in individual designs; inclusion of features of indigenous architecture; use of local materials; and provision of modern conveniences. The differences between the houses in the two towns reveal the decisions the designers faced. The houses at Norvelt had large kitchens, permitting a dining space within, as the company houses had, and bathrooms on the second floor in about half of the houses. Penn-Craft chose less expensive alternatives, of a small kitchen and combined living/dining room, and bathroom on the first floor, but the stone construction of the houses gave them a substantial appearance. Penn-Craft houses were slightly smaller overall, with the six-room L-plan house having about 750 square feet of interior space, compared to Norvelt's 837 square feet (Type 601). The Penn-Craft kitchens were half the size of those at Norvelt, while the living rooms were about the same. But both Penn-Craft and Norvelt houses were larger than the company-provided housing in the area; a four-room unit in a double house at Star Junction, in Fayette County, had about 710 square feet of space.[57]

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[55]Herbert L. Harper, "National Register Nomination: Norris District" (National Park Service, 1975). Paul Conkin denied that the Division of Subsistence Homesteads provided any of the financing. Paul K. Conkin, Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 113.

[56]Conkin, 305; Marc A. Weiss, "Developing and Financing the 'Garden Metropolis': Urban Planning and Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America," Planning Perspectives 5 (1990): 307.

[57]Mulrooney, 40.

Although the construction costs were not as low as desired in either community, this struggle between appealing design and affordable housing is one that continues to plague housing advocates today. The subsistence homesteads of Penn-Craft and Norvelt constituted a bold attempt to provide housing that would inspire pride in the community. The compact plans, inclusion of modern conveniences, and the picturesque semi-rural settings resulted in the development of an innovative small-house architecture. The contribution of subsistence-homestead communities of the 1930s lies in this attempt at environmental change as well as their vision of social reform.

B. Site:

The topography of the subsistence-homestead communities determined the layout of the site, with curvilinear streets providing oblique views, designed to lessen the impact of repetitive housing forms. There was some hierarchy among the streets, with heavily traveled through streets complemented by circles and cul-de-sacs. These features, reflecting contemporary planning thought, had appeared in the government-built shipyard-workers' communities.[58] The concept of the subsistence-homestead program was more rural than suburban, with generous acreage surrounding small single-family houses. Yet the preservation of a greenbelt surrounding the subsistence-homestead communities and the determination to attract industry were also goals of garden-city planning.[59]

The farm itself was not neglected either, with crop rotation charts and homestead layouts being provided. Again, efficiency was emphasized, with those elements needing the most attention placed closest to the house, and field crops and orchards at a distance. Raising poultry, cows, and pigs was recommended, along with appropriate outbuildings. In addition to a vegetable garden, an orchard was encouraged. The cooperative use of equipment was intended to reduce the cost of farming; the Division of Subsistence Homesteads even provided a plan for a three-family cooperative farm, complete with three-year crop-rotation plan.[60]

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[58]Other aspects of the shipyard communities, such as multiple-family dwellings and different types of dwellings aimed at different classes of workers, did not appear in the subsistence-homestead communities. John Nolen, New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns and Neighborhoods, 2nd ed. (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1937). Nolen was an interesting connection between the two; a specialist in industrial housing, Nolen had worked on the shipyard communities, and twenty-five years later served as an adviser to the subsistence-homestead program.

[59]Other 1920s innovations in planning had little applicability to the subsistence-homestead program. Clarence Stein and Henry Wright's Radburn, New Jersey, hailed as the American embodiment of the garden-city movement, featured interior parks, multiple-family dwellings, and strict separation of automobile and pedestrian--items not relevant to the farm-oriented subsistence-homestead communities. Clarence S. Stein, Toward New Towns for America (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1957), 41.

[60]Homestead Houses, 68, 71.

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B. Additional Sources of Information for the Towns of Norvelt and Penn-Craft

See HABS No. PA-5921, Norvelt, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, for more specific information regarding the Town of Norvelt.

See HABS No. PA-5920, Penn-Craft, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, for more specific information regarding the Town of Penn-Craft.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report is part of a larger project undertaken in 1989 to document the towns of Penn-Craft and Norvelt, Pennsylvania. The project was initiated by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, in cooperation with the America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randall Cooley, executive director. Both HABS/HAER and AIHP are agencies of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The project was prepared by Margaret M. Mulrooney, HABS historian, and Alison K. Hoaglund, HABS senior historian. Isabel Yang, HABS architect, produced the architectural drawings, and David Ames of the University of Delaware took the large-format photographs in 1991. The information contained within this report was originally published as Norvelt and Penn-

Craft, Pennsylvania: Subsistence-Homestead Communities of the 1930s (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1991). This manuscript also contains historic photographs of Norvelt, Penn-Craft, and other government subsistence homesteads.

All HABS produced documents, including those mentioned above, are held at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Additional research material, 35mm field photographs, and historic photos have been forwarded to the AIHP Collection within the Special Collections Division of the Stapleton Library at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

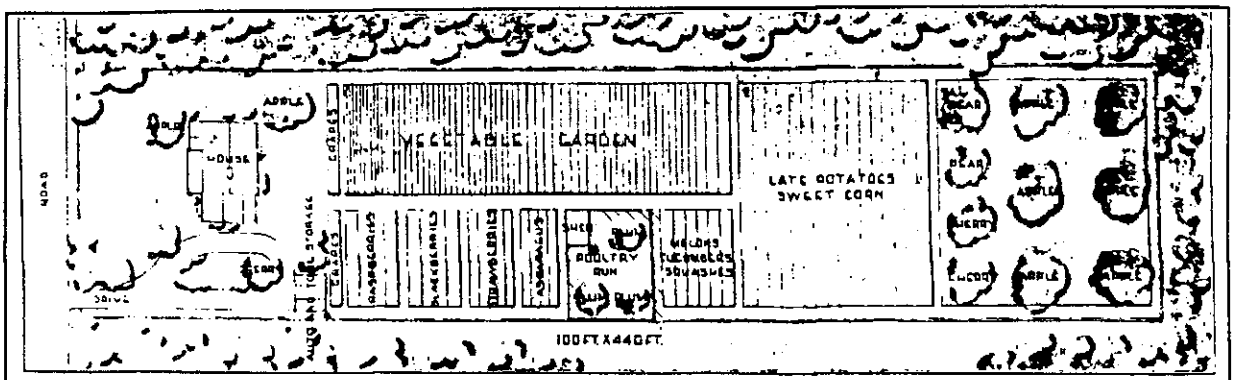
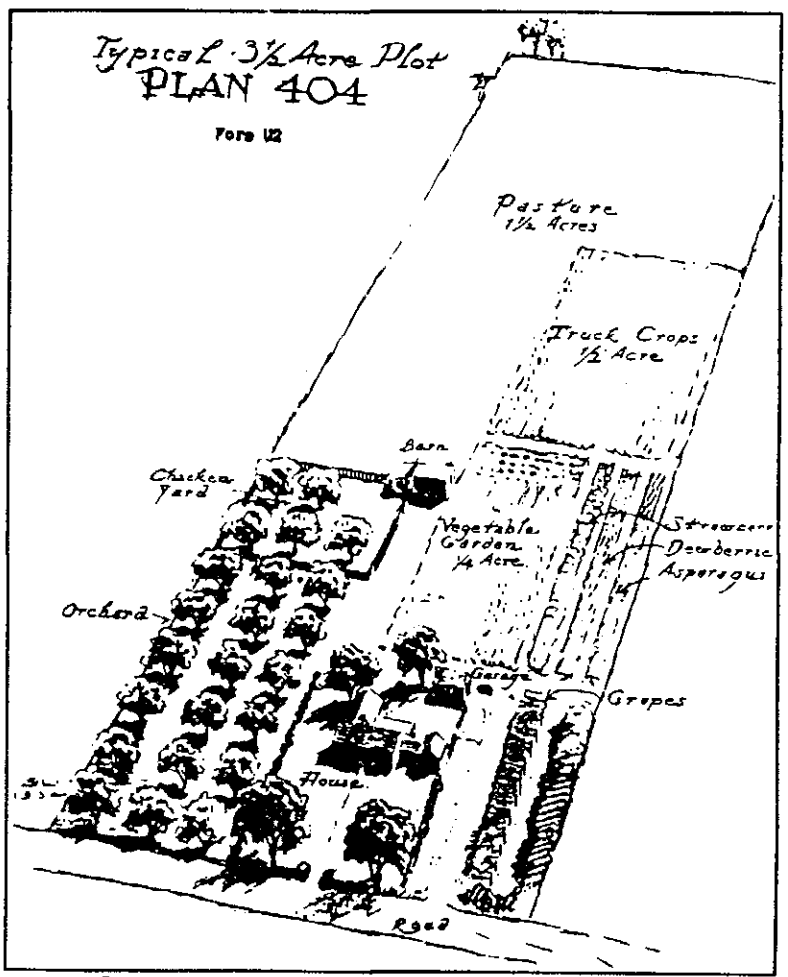


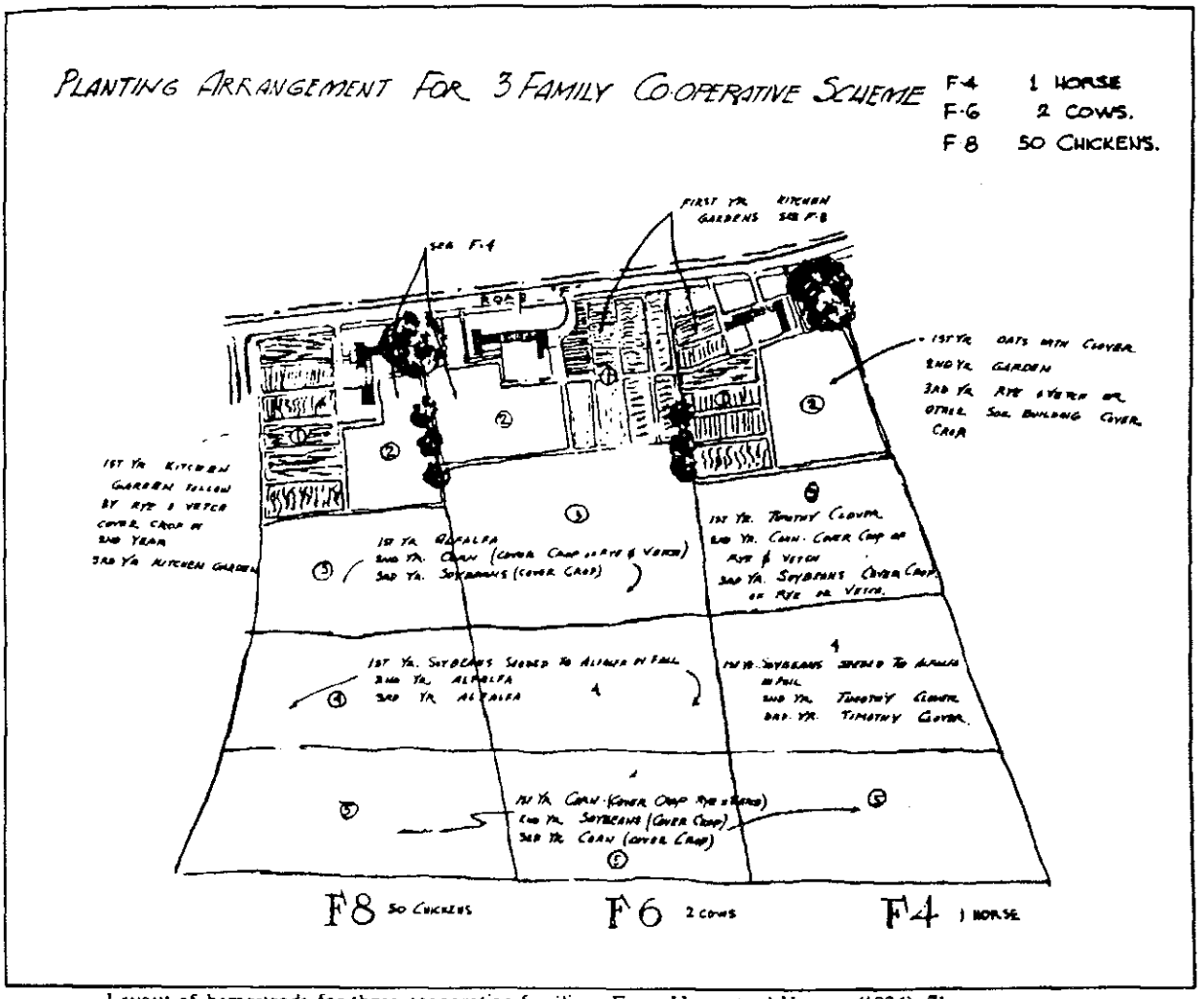
FIGURE 1.—A SUGGESTED PLAN FOR A 1-ACRE SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEAD IN THE NORTH.

Beauty and utility are combined in the lay-out of this tract containing 1.01 acres. In the area north of the Mason-Dixon line and east of the one-hundredth meridian this plan provides for a year's supply of vegetables, small fruits, poultry products, early and late potatoes, and most of the necessary tree fruits for a family of five. This is all that a man who is employed elsewhere during the growing season can care for properly by hand with the help of his family.

Proposed layout for a homestead plot. From Planning a Subsistence Homestead (1934), 4.

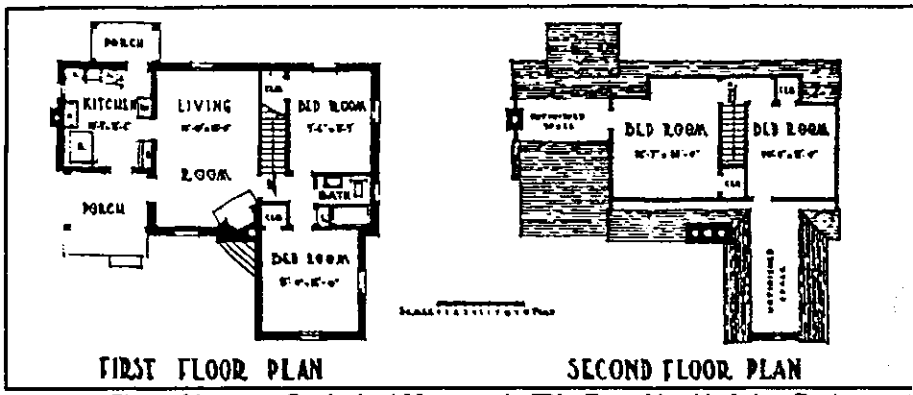


Proposed layout for a larger homestead plot. From Homestead Houses (1934), 65.

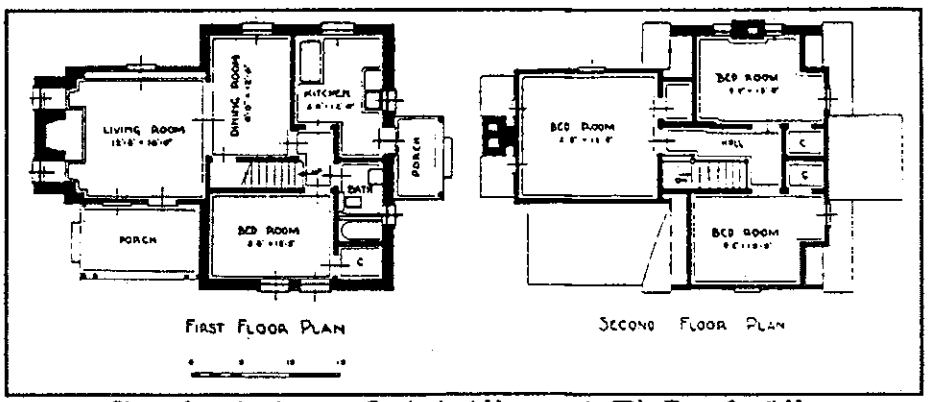


Layout of homesteads for three cooperating families. From Homestead Houses (1934), 71.

Perspective view of house at Cumberland Homesteads, TN. From Homestead Houses (1934), 19.



Plans of house at Cumberland Homesteads, TN. From Monthly Labor Review (January 1935), 25.



Plans of another house at Cumberland Homesteads, TN. From Small Houses (1939).